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ABSTRACT

The Puget Sound Educational Consortium (PESC) is a partnership of 11 school districts in the Puget Sound, Washington, area and the College of Education at the University of Washington. The partnership is based on the following assumptions: a belief in the school as a primary unit of change; a commitment to political inquiry; the development of research questions from the real context of teaching and learning; and cooperation and collaboration among overlapping institutional interests to effect genuine educational reform and renewal. This paper describes three separate, but overlapping phases of PSEC's action research program--initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. Findings indicate that although each district touts the importance of teacher involvement in assessment practices, action research remains an add-on activity. Two main barriers to institutionalization are identified--the fact that school districts are not cultures of inquiry, and the separation between the needs and interests of classroom teachers and district administrators. In conclusion, an effective program to disseminate action research is composed of teacher responsibility for developing and nurturing the action-research program; district administrative responsibility for general oversight; and consortium provision of training, a communications network, and evaluation. (LMI)

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In the Puget Sound Educational Consortium Member Districts

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Context

The Puget Sound Educational Consortium (PSEC) is a partnership of eleven school districts in the Puget Sound area and the College of Education at the University of Washington. Several shared assumptions underlie the partnership's program\. Those assumptions which apply most directly to PSEC's action research program are:

* a belief in the school as a primary unit of change;
* a commitment to critical inquiry;
* the development of research questions from the real context of teaching and learning
* cooperation and collaboration among overlapping institutional interests to effect genuine educational reform and renewal. (PSEC Year-End Report, 1988-89.)

A vitally important PSEC role is to serve as a catalyst for change. It introduces new ideas and practices into the Consortium and fosters their development, implementation, and possible institutionalization within member organizations. It is within this context that PSEC's action research program was introduced and developed.

In this paper we will discuss three separate, but overlapping phases in PSEC's action research program: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization.

Initiation

Action Research was introduced to the PSEC in 1987 through what was then called the Teacher Leadership Strand. The Teacher Leadership Strand was intended to foster the development of the leadership skills, capacity and roles of teachers who had no interest in or intention of leaving their role as a classroom teacher. (1) One of the Teacher Leadership Strand's first tasks was to explore the possible access routes teachers have for exercising leadership in school districts and school sites. As one might expect, the teachers had different perceptions on this topic. In an effort to resolve the differences, the members of the Teacher Leadership Strand decided to conduct a research project on the topic. A survey instrument was developed and data were collected and analysed. This initial survey was the genesis of the action research program in the Teacher Leadership Strand. Teachers

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generally do not have training in research methodology as a part of their professisonal preparation program and the Teacher Leadership Strand decided that it would provide such training.

The following year, two teacher leadership teams continued this first year's research on access to leadership opportunities and four additional teacher leadership teams began initial research into selected aspects of their own pedagogical practices.

Each of these efforts was built on the interests of the teachers who conducted the research. The teachers established the specific focus and collected relevant data. The Consortium's leaders guided the teachers through the interpretation of their data and, subsequently published their findings. (2) These initial action research activities greatly stimulated teacher interest in action research and a growing number of teachers in the Consortium expressed interest in being included in this program. In response, the PSEC core staff developed a strategy that enabled the Consortium to provide a rather extensive action research program on an exceedingly tight budget.

Implementation

The strategy employed featured three day-long workshops, the first of which was offered in the fall of 1989. At this initial workshop the concept of action research was intoduced and explained and specific focus areas were identified and initial research goals were established. The second workshop, held in the winter, addressed specific methodological problems, delineated acceptable research procedures, and discussed data analysis. The third session, offered in the spring, focused on final analysis and reporting. Each session was followed by staff visits to each action research site to reinforce the training and to help individuals resolve specific problems.(3) This general format has continued as the main implementation strategy. Participation in the action research program has grown steadily over the years. We estimate that during the third and fourth years of the action research project that we have had over two hundred teachers conducting action research projects.

Since 1990, support for these efforts was extended through a series of annual action research symposia which have been jointly developed and sponsored by PSEC, Washington State's Schools for the 21st Century Initiative and the Washington State University Project LEARN, which is located in Vancouver, Washington. The fourth symposium will be held in April, 1993. These symposia provide opportunities for teachers

and others interested in action research to share their findings with their colleagues and to hear from leading theorists in the field. Teacher evaluations of the symposia indicate that they value the opportunity to learn from others, to sharpen and expand their action research skills, and, importantly, to renew their energy for and commitment to action research.

Institutionalization

The third and current stage of our program is to move action research from the status as an important but somewhat isolated teacher activity to institutionalizing it as a regular and necessary part of the instructional improvement strategy of interested member districts. In this institutionalization phase PSEC has sought to develop the districts' internal capacity to train teachers in action research and to maintain the program with district funds. As indicated previously in this paper, PSEC is a catalyst for change. As such, it seeks to introduce and develop ideas and practices that will ultimately be picked up by the member organizations.

Our strategy has been to utilize a trainer-of-trainers model. For each of the past three years we have asked member districts to send teams of teachers experienced in action research to special workshops where they have received additional training in the research process, methods of working with adults in staff development, and the educational change process - especially as it applies to implementing action research in schools and districts. Each team of experienced action researchers worked with the PSEC core staff in training teachers from districts who were participating in initial action research training. This provided those designated to develop district action research programs an opportunity for guided "hands on" experience in providing action research training. It also afforded opportunities for them to explore their concerns and ideas about being an action research, teacher leader in their respective districts.

Our trainer-of-trainer model has not worked as well as we would have liked. While some districts recruited teachers with previous action research experience to attend our action research leadership program, others did not. Some districts included supportive in-service or evaluation staff as part of their team but, most did not. Some districts have continued to participate in the initial training but have expressed no interest in developing within district capacity to continue the work. Even more telling, none of the district teams have successfully established an initial training series within its own district.

Though assessment is a significant factor in the long range plans of each of the PSEC member districts and each touts the importance of teacher involvement in assessment practices, action research remains an add-on, largely restricted to a small cadre of teachers who conduct action research in their classrooms, quite apart from the mainstream of school district priorities and practices.

Barriers to Institutionalization

Why has it proven difficult to institutionalize action research in member districts that expressed an interest in making action research an important part of their instructional improvement strategy? Experienced teachers who have utilized action research in their work often speak glowingly of the importance action research has had on their classroom teaching and their professional careers. The teachers interesting presentations at the Annual International Symposia bear testimony to the creativity and enthusiasm action research excites. Further, given the current emphasis in the literature on inquiry, "learning organizations" and "total quality management", one would think that action research would be embraced by districts as a proven and effective tool for organizational and classroom improvement. Yet institutionalization has proven an elusive goal. What are the barriers that restrict the effectiveness of our trainer-of-trainer model for implementing action research into school districts?

One barrier is that districts, labels and pronouncements to the contrary, are not cultures of inquiry. This is not to say that they do not regularity collect and review data about their student's performance through state or national testing programs. But seldom are these data utilized for systematic and continual improvement of practice. The more typical pattern is to report the test results to the school board and, often, to the community through the media. This reporting generally results in a flurry of congratulatory nods or anguished hand wringing accompanied with pronouncements that the district must try harder. Subsequently workshops on some curricular or instructional approach are scheduled in an effort to bolster test scores the next time around.

This is not to suggest that school district administrators or teachers are not concerned about improving practice or that they don't see the potential value of such data for professional improvement. We believe that it is caused far more by several conditions that surround the educators' daily professional existence. First of all, the causal linkages between teacher behaviors and pupil performance is weak. This is especially true when the pupil's performance is severely impacted by poverty, abuse, dysfunctional families, or

limited English proficiency. One can predict quite accurately that students with these limitations will not generally do well in school. The test data simply confirm what most teachers already know, the critical next step of effective intervention is unclear.

A further complication is the "press for immediacy." The public is looking for clear measures, often expressed numerically or in a grade, that give them some indication of the quality of their schools or their child's performance. Under those conditions research is often considered a result, not a process. The fact that the test scores may not be a clear reflection of the school's performance but may, instead, reflect a whole range of influences over which the school has limited influence, is rarely considered when the meaning of test data are discussed. If test scores are down, the school is poor! Under these conditions it is not surprising that school districts adopt this "immediacy" standard. It is also not surprising, that action research which focuses upon the process of inquiry as much as the result, is not highly valued.

A second, and critically important barrier, is the separation between the needs and interests of classroom teachers and district administrators. As indicated in the paragraphs above, district administrators must respond to school board and community pressures to demonstrate in relatively clear and precise ways the level of success in the district schools and classrooms. These are formative measures collected for external audiences from which all kinds of inferences are made about the quality of the schools. Action research, as we have been utilizing it in the Consortium, are more formative measures intended for an internal audience - often the classroom teacher who conducts the research and, occasionally, administrators and teaching colleagues in the same school. In action research the process of inquiry is every bit as important as the final results. Such research has virtually no traditional inferential value.

This difference between the purpose of the research and the intended audience creates a barrier between the central administration and the classroom teacher. The classroom teacher might see immediate or long-range value in action research in that it will allow him or her to more carefully hone professional behavior to solve a classroom instructional problem. But the "results" of the teacher's action research does not help the district administrator deal with an external public that demands more familiar, traditional measures. Teachers might argue that action research should ultimately result in better professional practice which should, in turn, result in increases in more standard summative

measures. Such an argument has an inherent logic, however the process of proving that relationship is time consuming and fraught with complexities.

Strategic Implications.

One is reminded of C.P. Snow's Two Cultures. On the one hand the district has an externally directed culture that demands clear, unambiguous measures of the schools' effectiveness. On the other, the teachers have an internally directed culture that is intended as a process of problem solving to improve professional behavior. The distance between these cultures helps explain the shortcomings of the two strategies that the Consortium has followed in developing and implementing action research.

The first strategy, utilizing a separate teacher leadership strand, effectively developed a core group of teachers that was informed about, dedicated to, and involved in action research. This was a very effective strategy in that it evolved out of the perceived, needs and interests of teachers without direct district administrative approval. This initial core group has continued to champion the action research program and oversee its expansion to many other teachers.

The independence of this movement from the districts was also a flaw. A gap of understanding developed between the action research-oriented teachers and their district administrators which limited the likelihood that action research would be come a regularity in the Consortium districts. Because action research was isolated from the district administrators the teacher leaders and action researchers had only themselves to relate to. The Consortium played a major part in linking together teachers from across districts who shared common interests, thus energizing the entire program. However, in most, but not all districts, the action research program essentially became a relatively small informal group of dedicated colleagues,with limited impact outside of their own group.

The more recent strategy of working through the district administrators to develop a trainer of trainer model hasn't sufficiently taken into account the gap between these two cultures. Many district administrators have not been sufficiently oriented to action research and it is apparent in many instances that the responsible administrator is not an effective spokesperson for action research. The result is a lack of "passion" for this program. Some district level administrators are reluctant to commit the necessary funds, others have committed funds but take no leadership in the dissemination process. The teachers, on the

other hand, are committed to the program because it is useful to their efforts to achieve instructional objectives. Thus the program continues to limp along in many districts. We should note that district success in institutionalizing action research has gone forward on a broken front. While none have met full expectation, some districts have made progress. There is a high positive correlation between the degree of district success and the presence of a district administrator who understands and in committed to action research as a district improvement strategy.

We believe that an effective program to disseminate action research will be more successful if built on the following premises:

- the responsibility for developing and nurturing the action research program in a district should rest primarily with teachers, who have a natural personal and professional interest in this approach. Consistent with movements to decentralize decision making in other aspects of education, the funding, governance and direction of the action research program should be delegated to a district team of teachers. They would be allocated a budget for the program and they would be fully accountable to the district administration for the program's success. The eventual design of the program and its delivery and evaluation would be determined by the teachers, consistent with district policies. Our experience with the teacher leadership program convinces us that the teachers have the energy, creativity, and knowledge to make such a program successful.

- the district administration would have only general oversight of the program. They would work with the action research cadre to determine its budget and to assure that such matters as the program's calendar, delivery system, and approach are consistent with district practices. They would have to agree to the evaluation and accountability design and they would, annually, make recommendations to the board about the continuation of the program.

- the consortium would provide three essential services. It would be available to provide training in action research either through conducting programs for the districts or in assisting districts in developing and delivering their own training. It would serve as a communications network

among the district action research cadres through which cadres could compare their approaches, learn from each other, share speakers and resources, and generally advocate for action research as an effective tool for educational improvement. Importantly, the Consortium would also serve to monitor the quality of the action research programs. The Consortium might, for example, conduct periodic reviews of selected action research programs and identify both problems and exemplary practices. The Consortium might work with the cadres to plan annual or quarterly meetings of action research cadres from the participating districts.

Summary. If the approach suggested above was adopted, the Consortium's teacher leadership and action research program have come full circle. This approach recognizes the importance of nurturing the creativity and energy of teachers to work to solve problems that most directly affect them. This was an underlying premise of the teacher leadership program that fueled its success. By imbedding the teacher-directed, action research program within the district's budget and administrative structure the action research program acquires official legitimacy and accountability. By shifting the training and networking to the Consortium it allows districts to develop a synergy among the districts and programs that will serve to further the purposes of action research.

NOTES

1) Ann Lieberman was Executive Director of the PSEC during this initial period. She and her graduate assistant Pat Wasley, established the Teacher Leadership Strand and worked with it for the first two of its five year existence.

(2) There are five Teacher Leadership Publications: *Commitment and Challenge*; *Contributions To Improved Practice; New Skills, New Opportunities; Leading and Learning: Connecting Inquiry and Practice;* and *Increased Capacity: Broader Influence*

(3) Action Research consultant, Peter Holly, established our working format and provided the training during the third and fourth years of Strand activity.